

Situating a Youth Lens within Children's Literary Criticism and English Education

by Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, Westfield State University

In the introductory chapter of her book, *Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers* (2010), Nikolajeva discusses the state of the field of children's literature—a body of scholarship about children's and young adult literature—as a literary scholar. As she sets forth many of the debates in the field, she outlines some recent shifts, including the suggestion that “childhood studies” has a place in literary scholarship. By “childhood studies,” Nikolajeva refers to interdisciplinary scholarship focused on examining childhood (and adolescence). Ultimately, Nikolajeva asserts that no one theory is better than any other, and all theory that raises critical questions about texts is important and relevant, so that no one area of scholarship should take precedence over another.

I firmly agree with Nikolajeva's assertion that no one theory is better than any other and that many theoretical lenses offer meaningful and important insights into the ways texts operate. However, I think that her position in literary studies versus our own in English Education makes a difference in thinking about the question of what types of theoretical frames or lenses are important to bring to the reading of young adult literature specifically.

So, in this paper, I engage in a bit of a strange exercise as a way to respond to the question of the role of “childhood studies” in the analysis of young adult literature. First of all, I retrace some of the literature review that Robert Petrone, Mark Lewis and I have discussed that situate a Youth Lens across scholarly efforts in English Education and English literary study. I do this, in part, to address an “anxiety of influence” (Bloom, 1973) of where our work fits within existing scholarship, something we did not know until after we had been doing it on our own for years. But I do this work to argue three points:

1. Analyzing representations of adolescence/ts as a construct, though newer in the field of English Education's efforts to analyze young adult literature, has been circulating in the world of children's literary study for a while. I will discuss why this makes sense.
2. The way scholars in the two fields stage the examination of young adult literature through constructs of adolescence differs and this difference matters. I will discuss some examples of these distinct theoretical foundations.

3. As a result of the divergent sources shaping the way that the fields of literary studies and literacy studies stage analyses of young adult literature through examinations of adolescence as a construct, and as a result of the disciplinary boundaries of our respective fields, I see the “home” of a Youth Lens across disciplines, but especially akin to the work we aim to do as scholars and teachers in the teaching of English. I hope to use this analytic exercise as a way to persuade you of this last point.

Analyzing Adolescence as a Construct

Part of what incited the three of us to name and articulate a Youth Lens came from recognizing that we were not alone in seeing a productive body of scholarship ensuing from examining representations of adolescence in young adult texts. As we have written about elsewhere, several key children’s literature scholars deliver literary analyses of young adult books by challenging a naturalized view of youth as biologically and psychologically-bound characters who are already known to us (see Petrone, Sarigianides & Lewis, in press).

For example, Nikolajeva’s (2010) theory of “aetonormativity,” the idea that there is an “adult normativity that governs the way children’s literature has been patterned from its emergence until the present day” (p.8), centralizes the role of assumptions tied to age as the key perspective through which “adult” authors write about “adolescent” characters. Through this theory of aetonormativity, Nikolajeva and other literary scholars illuminate the ways that authors of young adult texts ultimately *judge* their youth characters for actions considered immature as they begin their paths towards the maturity already known by the author and the other “adults” in the text. Rather than taking age differences between adults and adolescents as normative, Nikolajeva examines the assumption of this age difference through her theory of aetonormativity.

Another literary scholar, Roberta Trites, in her book *Disturbing the universe: Power and repression in adolescent literature* (2000) includes a range of readings of key young adult texts by seeing adolescence as a construct. For example, her interpretation of *Weetzie Bat*, a book that I have used for years with English teachers to great objection because of how “sexy” it is, is a text that Trites sees as conservative. In Trites’s reading, all the youth achieve happiness once they settle into monogamous relationships. As a literary scholar, she can more easily see this text as conservative given its larger messages in ways that, admittedly, I had more trouble given teachers’ objections to the the book because of its depictions of youth as sexual (see Sarigianides, 2012; 2014). But again, rather than presuming a sexually innocent adolescence as normative, Trites’s analysis explores the effect of these norms in representations of youth in young adult literature.

So, by citing these two examples, I mean to show that literary scholars—academics primarily focused on the analysis of literary texts—much more than literacy scholars—academics in our field who focus on the analysis of texts as well how they are taught and with what effects, have considered the impact of seeing adolescence as a construct in their interpretations of young adult literature. But this makes sense since, for children’s literary scholars, adolescents *are* always-already representations when examined in texts and for this reason, considering adolescent characters as constructs is not much of a conceptual jump. The “real” youth affected by these representations might be considered in examinations of the role of literature in the world, but that is not part of what literary scholars necessarily take into account. It is, however, what we do in the field of English Education and in English classrooms, so let me get closer to this point by moving on to my second claim.

Different theoretical genealogies support the analysis of adolescence in texts in the two fields

Literary scholars and literacy scholars, for the most part, cite different theoretical sources and traditions in staging analyses of adolescence in texts. I am not attempting a comprehensive review here, but some quick examples will illuminate my point.

For example, in Kokkola’s (2013) important book-length analysis of sexuality in Anglophone young adult literature, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants*, the construction of youth as sexually innocent is mainly staged through scholarship in art history. She references the work of G. Stanley Hall in shaping the new concept of adolescence, and references Philippe Aries’s (1962) *Centuries of Childhood*, but for her argument about adolescent sexuality, she centralizes the ideas in Anne Higonnet’s book, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, which is an analysis of shifts in views of childhood from portraiture to contemporary photography. Incidentally, this staging is fascinating, and I highly recommend both Kokkola’s book and Higonnet’s if you are interested in questions of revised views of childhood and adolescence, but as I will show, these theoretical bases differ greatly from those typically arising from our field of English Education.

Similarly, Nikolajeva (2010) in setting up her theory of aetonormativity, does so through two main theoretical sources: queer theory’s disruption of all norms, not only those tied to sexuality; and Bakhtin’s notion of carnival as a temporary suspension and inversion of rules and hierarchies so that those rules and hierarchies are exposed as able to be subverted. This theoretical backdrop for her concept of “aetonormativity” allows her to claim that *all* children’s literature involves an adult normativity at the center (with *Pippi in the South Seas* as

noteworthy exception) so that this body of writing that could be subversive is actually conservative overall, allowing youth to rebel for a temporary period before subduing this rebellion in favor of adult norms.

In contrast, when we stage our Youth Lens, for example, we rely on youth studies scholarship, like Nancy Lesko's (2001/2012) *Act Your Age!*, Lesko & Talburt's (2012) *Keywords in Youth Studies* as well as Vadeboncoeur & Stevens' (2005) collection *Re/Constructing "the Adolescent."* As a result, we are looking for portrayals of youth that meet or break with developmental and biologically-determined views of adolescence that include age-constraints (like Nikolajeva's theory of "aetonormativity"), as well as expectations of a sexually innocent youth (like Kokkola's analysis in *Fictions*). But in addition, we might examine the role of other "confident characterizations" of adolescence (Lesko, 2001/2012) in textual representations (e.g. a classed view of adolescence as involving a slow coming-of-age into adulthood that leaves out youth whose lives have immersed them in "adult" worries and responsibilities, perhaps due to economic needs, than the middle class youth around which adolescence was conceptualized).

In other words, while I agree with Coats's (2006) assessment that "no one discipline has the last word regarding what defines childhood or what constitutes effective intervention" (191), *how* a body of scholarship frames its perception of adolescence as a construct matters, and taking closer looks at the ways that the education profession, especially, requires teachers to know and understand and think through developmental psychology, for example, adds analytic dimensions to the ways those same English teachers can (and, I would argue, should) examine portrayals of youth in young adult literature.

Situating a Youth Lens within English Education

If literary scholars see a consideration of perceptions of adolescence or childhood in literary scholarship to be "risky business" (see Gubar 2013), literacy scholars do not and cannot. As English teachers working with youth and as English Educators thinking about the role of texts in circulating images and possibilities of adolescence for middle and high school—and adult—readers, examining portrayals of adolescence in texts aimed at youth is right at home for us in this discipline.

Considering who the young adult is in young adult literature opens youth and adult readers of these texts to critically question the portrayal of youth for youths' consumption. Leaving out this critical question permits the unproblematic circulation of additional texts that reinforce youth as forever becoming rather than being; as less finished than the "complete" adults they will become; and as perennially beholden to their bodies and their hormonal forces (Lesko 2012).

Some of these questions may be apt for literary scholars, but for English teachers working with such texts—and any texts that portray adolescence—we must care about the implications of these stale beliefs about youth on the real youth in our classes.

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Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides is an Associate Professor of English Education at Westfield State University. Her research interests include representations of adolescence, young adult literature, and teachers' ideas about youth. She has published in *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Journal of Youth Studies*, and *English Journal*.

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